

EXTRA

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Sully Doroshow / Staff Photographer

Diane Johnson, left, washes dishes and pots at Cafe Latte with an upbeat attitude that keeps up the spir-

its of fellow workers, such as head chef Brenda Chirpich, right.



Liz Hafalia / Staff Photographer

Roger Young, one of eight trainees from Midway Training Services, puts plenty of gusto into his new job at Chi-Chi's Mexican Restaurants, St. Paul.

WORKING

Handicapped adults succeed in the job world

By Ann Baker
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In the narrow, crowded kitchen of Grand Avenue's Cafe Latte, Diane Johnson, 30, lifts steaming bowls out of the dishwasher and dries them with a towel.

Smiling, she points to a red light rigged to go on when the dish cycle is over. It was installed because she can't hear the dishwasher's buzzer.

Johnson has severe hearing loss, along with cerebral palsy and mental retardation. That puts her in the category of "severely mentally handicapped," meaning she'd be expected to spend the rest of her life in, if not an institution, at least a segregated group home and day center.

But for the past two years, a new wave of programs have begun for severely handicapped adults, programs their designers hope will give each one a * chance to work in a regular job alongside non-handicapped employees.

In the kitchen of Chi-Chi's Mexican Restaurante in St. Paul, eight new trainees from Midway Training

Services wear the same red shirts and white aprons as other Chi-Chi's employees as they learn to cut, peel, scrub and fry food under the guidance of a teacher from 916 Area Vocational-Technical Institute and staff from the Midway center. The regular kitchen staff frequently interrupt their own work to show them how to core a tomato or open a can.

In the laundry of the new Radisson University Hotel, Minneapolis, two June graduates of St. Paul's Bridgeview School for retarded students are learning to fold sheets and towels and load and unload the washing machines with help from a job coach and a time-and-motion expert. After several weeks, the laundry's regular supervisors will take over monitoring their new employees.

Bob Googins, a hearing-impaired and retarded former client of Kaposia Developmental Learning Center, was hired last year to be a janitor at the Sun Ray J.C. Penney store. On Googins' 26th birthday, the other Penney employees organized a party at which they sang "Happy Birthday" to him, accompanying their singing voices by "signing" the words with their hands.

There's nothing new about mildly retarded people going to work in hotel laundries and restaurant kitchens. But until recently, those retarded people who have multiple or severe handicaps stayed in their own special day centers or in sheltered workshops, doing light assembly work for below-minimum wages.

Over the past 10 years, successful new teaching techniques developed with retarded children began to challenge the limitations that had been placed on retarded adults. Some visionaries began to talk about tearing down the walls of the adult day programs and moving them into the community. One was Gary Warrington, who has run a vocational program for retarded students at Minneapolis' Emerson School since 1975.

"For 10 years it's always been my goal to move handicapped people out of these dependent services that have been created for them," Warrington said.

Last year he was hired by the Metropolitan Council to help local agencies do just that. He is a consultant with the council's Work Training Project, a three-year program to help agencies get clients into mainstream

jobs with whatever support they need

Unless their wages exceed the typical \$3 to \$4 an hour, those who are receiving public assistance because of their disabilities continue to receive that assistance, as well as \$65 of their monthly wages plus half the remainder of their earnings.

"It's fun to get them working and feeling better," Warrington said. "They're going to make it, but they'll need lifelong monitoring. And it's going to be cost-effective.

"Employers are open to this idea," he went on. "Of course, you have to know what you're doing, from setting up to follow-through. The key is that you expect success, not failure."

If expecting success is a key to creating success, so is being creative and flexible. Another key is attention to even the tiniest, most subtle details.

The project's field manager, Terry Kayser, treats every component of a job as something that can change — not only the employee, but the workplace, procedures and existing staff. He examines what the Please see Work/5C

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worker can do to adapt to the job, and also how the job can be adapted to him.

My theory is that any time we can make the workplace easier by removing small barriers to performance, the better it will be," said Kayser. It was he who installed the dishwasher light for Diane Johnson.

In many cases, the handicapped employee isn't the only one to benefit. At Cafe Latte, for example, other dishwashers often check Johnson's light to see if the dishes are finished. And the other kitchen staffers say they're inspired by Johnson's eagerness and enthusiasm.

"I'm just thrilled with Diane," said head chef Brenda Chirpich. "We were all told beforehand that it was going to be a little bit different. I wondered if I'd be able to communicate with her.

"We've had a lot of dishwashers; she's been the best," Chirpich said. "It's fun to have her come in every day. She takes pride in her work. It's really a tiresome job, but she manages. Even though she seems unsteady, and her movements aren't real fluid, she breaks less (china and glassware) than other people we've had."

Chirpich believes it made a huge difference to have Kayser lay the groundwork for Johnson and to have a job coach come in and help her adjust to the routine. Recently, the cafe hired another handicapped dishwasher for a different shift, but he didn't have a job coach and has not been adjusting very well, Chirpich said. He has trouble doing more than one task at a time. To both Kayser and Chirpich, that proved the point: Severely handicapped people can do the job, but only if they get thorough coaching at the start, followed by support staff available whenever needed, maybe forever.

The cooking teacher from 916 Technical-Vocational Institute who is supervising at Chi-Chi's agrees.

"Without the proper nurturing environment, these people would

never grow," Lily Zahariades said. "When they do have it, this opens up a whole area in their lives. It brings the handicapped people into the mainstream and makes them feel part of a team. They're being trained for the place where they'll be working, so there's no loss of training.

"One young man takes a long time peeling onions but does the best job you've ever seen," she went on. "Now we're working on his doing it faster, and he'll be wonderful. We know that no one is going to hire them if they're three times slower than anyone else."

Zahariades and others believe once the retarded employees learn their tasks and work up to speed, they will be invaluable, because they'll want to stay in the same job.

That's something Jim Larkin is counting on. He is the manager of Chi-Chi's restaurant in Minnetonka, which took Zahariades and eight trainees from the Cerebral Palsy Center of St. Louis Park into its kitchen in June. As in the St. Paul restaurant, the trainees work in groups of four for four-hour sessions on alternating days. Their training will stretch over several months, and 70 percent of its cost will be covered by the same vocational funding that is available for non-handicapped Minnesotans.

Regular employees at Chi-Chi's only train for a week. But manager Larkin doesn't mind the long training-in period for these workers. He hopes in the long run it will cut down on the costs of turnover and retraining, which for many restaurants come to \$100,000 a year.

"I believe it's worthwhile. I think we'll get some employees who'll be very loyal," he said. "I'm surprised how quickly they're picking up the tasks."

Larkin said he's noticed the other employees seem to enjoy helping the trainees.

At Chi-Chi's in Minnetonka, Randy Johnson, 33, works fast and furiously sorting forks and knives that come out of the dishwasher. He drops one and looks anxiously

at his supervisor from the Cerebral Palsy Center.

"You need to send that back, Randy," she says, and he does.

How does he find his job?

"Good," he says, adding he likes to open cans, fry taco chips and crush tomatoes for the hot sauce.

His supervisor, Mary Lou Melby, says Johnson has been much more relaxed and attentive than he was back in the center.

There are now several day centers throughout the Twin Cities developing work programs in regular job sites, several with the technical assistance of the Metropolitan Council's project.

One of the first centers to get involved was Kaposia Developmental Learning Center, St. Paul. Its staff decided to look into a work program after analyzing the center's classes in basic skills, such as telling time and riding the bus.

"We decided all our curriculum was geared to children and realized that was pretty degrading for adults," said Kaposia's director, Jackie Mlynarczyk.

So they got rid of their kiddie stuff and melted down their crayons and made them into candles. Then they had a yard sale where they sold the candles along with the games, puzzles, musical toys and coloring books. Now 12 of Kaposia's 75 clients are in regular jobs, working as housekeepers,

janitors, salad-makers and at recycling centers.

Occasionally, someone gets laid off and comes back to Kaposia. But now the center's in-house program has changed. Instead of classes, games and outings, it runs a housecleaning service and a lawn service, with more than two dozen regular paying customers.

Instead of just passing time, Mlynarczyk said, the people at Kaposia are doing work that makes them feel proud and productive.

Last week three state agencies made a joint application for a five-year federal grant of \$500,000 a year to stimulate the development of supported work programs for severely handicapped people.

"We want to move supported work from isolated demonstrations to become a service that is state-wide and system-wide," said Jim House, director of client services for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in the Minnesota Department of Economic Security.